

Maxim Gorki Theater Leads an Immigrant Vanguard in Berlin

By Christopher D. Shea

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BERLIN — Standing in her office at the Maxim Gorki Theater here, a pack of Gauloises cigarettes in hand, Shermin Langhoff gestured at an image of one of Jeff Koons’s gleaming balloon sculptures hanging on her wall.

Slowing the pace of her usually rapid German, she said: “It’s lunacy. This object is 20 years old, and for 20 years nothing has happened in art, other than in the performing arts.”

Ms. Langhoff, 45, who immigrated from Turkey as a child, was contrasting what she sees as visual art’s static legacy with that of the firebrand theater she took over in 2013 and has since made a nexus for plays tackling issues like immigration, race and assimilation. A small but influential house in the Mitte district in the city center, it is one of the five major theaters here run primarily with public money.

In May 2012, the city’s mayor at the time, Klaus Wowereit, named Ms. Langhoff, a theater producer, the Gorki’s artistic director. In an op-ed for the newspaper Die Zeit soon after — titled “How White Is Art?” — Mr. Wowereit’s cultural secretary, André Schmitz, heralded her appointment as an “important signal” for those who see immigration as a boon rather than as a problem, and floated the idea of instituting “diversity quotas” at the city’s cultural institutions.

The signal was all the more potent given Ms. Langhoff’s status as a prominent member of the city’s Turkish population, which has struggled to assimilate since the 1960s.

Ms. Langhoff, whose German surname comes from her husband, the stage director Lukas Langhoff, has revolutionized the Maxim Gorki, which in August was named “Theater of the Year” by the prestigious arts magazine Theater Heute. But so far, her appointment hasn’t shaken up the rest of the theater establishment. Ms. Langhoff and the repertoire she’s programmed to reflect contemporary Berlin remain outliers.

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“It’s a city theater, and that requires us to engage with this city — with everything that a city like Berlin offers,” Ms. Langhoff said. “And that’s, of course, a lot.”



Shermin Langhoff, the artistic director of the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin. Esra Rotthoff

Immigrants and their children constitute roughly a quarter of Berlin’s population, and the city’s Turkish enclave is the largest outside of Turkey. The city’s four other main dramatic stages are still run by white German men, as are the city’s two leading opera companies.

The lack of diversity on Berlin’s stages drew international attention in 2012, when the American playwright Bruce Norris withdrew the Deutsches Theater’s rights to perform his play “Clybourne Park” after finding out that the management planned to cast a nonblack actor in a role written for an African-American performer. Mr. Norris withdrew permission for the show when, according to the playwright, an administrator at the theater said it planned to “experiment with makeup.”

The issue is particularly charged in Berlin because of the large budget controlled by the small cultural affairs department. Annually, the department dispenses around 400 million euros, about \$429 million, more than twice the budget of New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs, in a city with roughly 40 percent of New York City’s population and around 10 percent of its gross domestic product. Together, Berlin’s major stages, including the Gorki, receive around half of city’s annual cultural budget.

Top cultural appointments like Ms. Langhoff's are made by the city. Unlike in the United States or Britain, where companies rely significantly on private money, most theaters here — from fringe outlets to major stages — sink or swim depending on government funding. More than 80 percent of the Gorki's €12 million annual operating budget comes from the city.

Ms. Langhoff swept into her new role in 2013, replacing every actor but one in the theater's ensemble and transforming it into the most diverse company in the city. About half of the current 18-member company is of Turkish or Afro-German background, while a number of the members have Eastern European immigrant roots.

She and Jens Hillje (whom Ms. Langhoff brought in as the theater's co-director) also transformed the repertoire, adding English supertitles to shows and appointing an Israeli, Yael Ronen — some of whose plays, like "Hakoah Wien," explore the paradoxes of being Jewish in the German-speaking world — as house director.

The new repertoire mixes a familiar German theater aesthetic — director-driven revivals of classics — with works that grapple with contemporary politics, particularly immigration. This month, the theater staged "It Snows In April," a series of performances, lectures and film screenings about Turkey's mass murder of Armenians in 1915. The Gorki also recently opened its adaptation of Orhan Pamuk's novel "Snow," about a Turkish man who returns to his hometown, after living in Germany, to find that radical Islam has taken hold of his old friends.

One popular work, "Verrücktes Blut" ("Crazy Blood"), by Nurkan Erpulat and Mr. Hillje, follows a white German teacher overseeing a classroom of rowdy immigrant youth. The teacher grows increasingly furious at the students and finally takes them hostage. In a final moment of ferocity, she blurts a stream of Turkish — exposing herself as a Turkish German trying desperately to hide her heritage.

Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin has put on shows like "Common Ground" that examine the immigrant experience in that city. Thomas Aurin

When prompted, Ms. Langhoff spoke in long, eloquent paragraphs about the theater's political potential. She returned several times to the importance of work that grapples with the contradictions of European nationhood — the fact that Continental thinkers invented a worldview based on principles of brotherhood and equality in the late 18th century, then quickly drew national borders to keep others out.

Asked whether she has political discussions with the artists who work at the theater, Ms. Langhoff said with a dose of sarcasm: "Well, of course. What should I talk about with them? Shakespeare?"

Critical praise for her tenure has been for the most part lavish. After the Gorki won the Theater of the Year title, the company was invited to Theatertreffen, a festival that in May will bring in the 10 most notable German-language productions of the year for a two-week showcase in Berlin.

Wagner Carvalho, who runs the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, a small theater dedicated to telling immigrant stories, where Ms. Langhoff served as artistic director for several years, suggested that her success comes with some drawbacks. For one thing, being highlighted as a role model can limit future progress: "Is here the end of this road?" he asked. "From Ballhaus to Gorki and stop?"

City officials, for their part, say they are committed to attracting diverse audiences to the arts. They have, over the last several years, set quotas for immigrants and their offspring on the juries that determine which emerging artists receive public money for their projects, and encouraged institutions to develop plans for attracting more minorities.

Ms. Langhoff largely skirts questions of whether she thinks the city government is doing enough and insists on the importance of broad funding for emerging artists of all backgrounds.

She seems at ease, however, with her status as a minority player in a powerful public position. "There's a huge effort to assimilate, a kind of conformism to do Germany right," she said of immigrant experiences like her own. "And because of that, I need to be critical of the system in my job."

"Having an outsider on the inside," she added, "can never be bad for the arts."